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AN ATTEMPT TO ACCOUNT FOR THE
ORIGIN OF THE IRISH.

Quid non longa dies, quid non consumitis anni ?

IN reviewing the annals of the original population of every country, whether rude or civilized (indeed the former character has once stigmatized all that we read of,) there must needs besome mixture of doubt entertained with regard to their authenticity. Ever since the confusion of tongues prevailed at the building of the *Tower of Babel* (for prior to that time, one language was common among the then limited tribes) mankind began to settle in different colonies, their progeny multiplied, their numbers daily increased, and the faculty of speech, with multiplied sorts of it, soon extended over numberless tracts of the habitable globe. In some manner like this, did mankind, after the universal inundation of the world, distinguish themselves into several tribes or colonies; and the places they had hitherto lived in together, being grown *too strait* for them, it was agreed upon, which way

each several tribe or colony should steer its course, beginning with the countries that were next them, and designing to proceed further and further as the increase of their several companies should require. But, in process of time, according as the human race enlarged in their primitive numbers, some contented themselves with the spontaneous produce of the earth, such as herbs, plants, &c. to be exposed to the inclemency of the seasons, the injuries of the air, the ravages of wild beasts, and sometimes to hunger and cold; and to be compelled to take shelter in subterraneous caves, formed without manual art or dexterity; whilst others, again, not willing to conform to this mode of subsistence, chose to emigrate as a banditti, into foreign districts, to live upon the produce and industry of their neighbours. Sometimes, however, if the country had been stored with inhabitants of the same institutions, customs, and laws; in a word, if they bore a pretty exact resemblance to one another, a sort of bond, or union would be immediately formed between them, for the most part through interest and self-defence, in order to continue without hurt in these possessions, or to protect themselves from the fury of their contending adversaries. Hence it follows, that they would be more susceptible of transmitting their name and transactions, to succeeding ages. For instance, in England, though the *ancient Britons* were so harrassed and oppressed by the invasions of their northern neighbours the *Scots* and *Picts*, as to solicit a speedy assistance from the *Saxons*, a warlike people, inhabiting the north of Germany, which last did not long remain in tranquil possession of the kingdom, till they were vanquished by the *Danes*

a robust and enterprising people, who had long infested the northern seas by their perpetual piracies, and were afterwards succeeded by the *Normans*, under the command of their leader, *William*; yet I say, considering all this continued scene of desolation and terror, some of its primeval inhabitants survived the wreck of their oppressors.

From the view now given, which is no more than superficial, it is alone evident, that in every country in the universe, the vestiges of its antique and primitive owners, may, in some form or other be traced. But our main point in question now is, *who were the original inhabitants of Ireland, and by what means came THEY there?*

But before we enter into this inquiry, it is proper to advance the following observations: First, That by penetrating into distant ages of antiquity, no certain or plausible documents can be relied on, concerning the truth or falsehood of any particular nation; for in the words of *Virgil*, "*Ævi longinquavolvet mutare vetustas.*" Secondly, That as mankind were once in a state of barbarism and uncivilization, very few traces of refinement and veracity can be expected to come through such a channel. Thirdly, From which we infer, that whenever advanced to a higher degree of bodily perfection and mental improvement, they are willing to represent their genuine ancestry in as illustrious a point of view as possible.

It is therefore apparent, that in tracing the history of any country, fiction may assume a real appearance of truth, and light be involved in the gloomy regions of obscurity. Besides, in the present case, it is a fact to which many

candid minds will consent, that to explore the true origin of the *Irish* is attended with much darkness and difficulty, even a task almost impracticable, as it would be to form a direct and regular path through the great Desert of *Cobir*, in Chinese *Tartary*, or to inclose the sea within certain limits. But overlooking such obstacles, let us adduce the opinions of some writers, recent and ancient, and, if within the compass of our power, point out their defects, and admit only of those that are most congenial to the general unison of history.

By some historians, then, Ireland is supposed to have been peopled from *Spain*, which subjected the inhabitants to a state of the meanest servitude. But from many circumstances they appear to have had the same origin in common with their neighbours, and that this country was first peopled from *Scythia* and *Sarmatia*; for the nation of the *Scythians* was always reckoned very ancient, even by some as of more remote antiquity than *Egypt*, which was once the nurse and parent of arts and of superstition.

Wherefore then, were it not to be admitted that the *Scythians* (who were a colony that settled there, from *Spain*, and introduced the *Phœnician* language and letters, about five hundred years before the Christian æra,) were the first inhabitants of *Erin*? this one circumstance we can propose without hesitation, that like them the *Irish* were once a people living in the hunter or shepherd state, not attending to the arts of commerce, civilization, nor industry: neither plowing their land, nor constructing houses, dwellings, or habitations, but always tending their flocks and herds, and accus-

tomed to wander through uncultivated deserts. Like them also, they lived upon milk and honey, plants, vegetables and various other natural productions of their soil. The use of wool, and clothes, was in a great measure, if not altogether, unknown to them; and being sometimes pinched by immoderate cold, and other inconveniencies, arising from the numerous lakes, morasses, and forests, with which the country in particular abounded, they were actuated from motives of self-preservation to make use of skins of animals, both great and small. Moreover, they would be itinerants, having no fixed residence, without kings to govern them, or courts of judicature to appeal to, even when the cry of justice would loudly call for the punishment due to tyrannical power. Thus, as among the gregarious kinds of animals, rank would be principally supported by the effect of strength, courage, velocity, activity, or such other qualities of the body. Finally, the jarring seeds of discord and animosity, would soon enliven their breasts; citizens would contend with citizens, friends with friends.

Hence, it would immediately come to pass, like the state of mankind mentioned by Ovid in his *Iron age*, that truth, modesty, and every social virtue would no longer shine with a conspicuous lustre, but would be succeeded by fraud, avarice, force, and every baneful art—

“ Now (brandish'd weapons glittering in their hands)

Mankind is broken loose from moral bands,

Faith flies, and piety in exile mourns;
And justice here opprest, to heav'n returns.”

Nor is the account here given of the Aborigines, or first inhabitants

of Ireland, improbable; neither is it an ideal picture, without any foundation in reason or history; for that such was, in a great measure, their primitive condition, need not cost one anxious thought or wish.

But to return from this digression, if any it be, it is reported that when Julius Cæsar made his expedition into Britain, he describes Hibernia as being about one half the size of the island which he had explored; and while the Romans maintained their conquests in the latter region, Ireland continued of course to be well known to them; and Ptolemy, who is styled the father of Geography, has given a map of the island, which is superior in accuracy to that which represents Scotland. It is well known, however, that towards the decline of the Western empire, as the country became more and more common to human researches, and peopled by various tribes, that the ruling people which the Romans found in Ireland, were the *Scoti* or *Scots*; and thenceforth the country began to be termed *Scotia*, “an appellation,” says Mr Pinkerton, “retained by the monastic writers till the eleventh century, when the name *Scotia* having passed to modern Scotland, the ancient name of Hibernia began to reassume its honours.

But if Ireland was first inhabited by the Scots or Caledonians, especially in the time that the Roman general invaded Albion, (which was, according to chronological calculation, fifty two years before Christ) why, it may be asked, did they not continue in possession of it? But this question, it may be remarked, is no less extravagant than it is absurd; for among all the nations we read of in writings sacred or profane, none did thoroughly pre-

serve their real pedigree to times more advanced in the records of history. This may be accounted for on principles the most incontestible, and carrying with them the most obvious conviction : which are, First, The baneful effects of the ravages of war, one corps being infinitely eclipsed by another in number, courage, military discipline or skill : Secondly, The nature of the climate, or the bad constitution of their government, whereby they being forced to visit other shores, they would be warranted to enjoy security of their persons and property, without fear to annoy, or carnage to afflict them. From which it happens, that the original natives of Ireland, like those of other countries, were involved in a perpetual scene of warfare, when placed in such junctures ; and in order to defend themselves from the voracious jaws of their opponents, their numbers would be reduced to the most inconsiderable importance.

I make no doubt that the Scots seized the greater part of this country, and confirmed it in their hands for a considerable series of time ; and that being unable to occupy the productive parts of it, especially those adapted for seafaring business, they were necessitated by their savage invaders to possess other tracts less favourable perhaps, to their tempers and dispositions. But the most plausible account I think can be given, and which holds good at the present day, is, that the Scots possessed the northern parts of Ireland, more particularly the province of Ulster, and retained them, as it were, indelible, through the corroding hand of time.

Again : other writers assert that the *Celtic Gauls* first peopled the kingdom of Ireland, and that from

them some of the more modern residents derive their origin. This indeed is no hypothesis nor chimerical position ; for were we to trace the source of several nations in Europe, particularly Denmark, England, France, Batavia or Holland, the Netherlands, Spain, Switzerland, and divers others besides Ireland, we would immediately find the *Celts*, notwithstanding their being gradually repelled by more powerful assailants, to remoter parts of their countries, to be the only people of whom we have any gratifying proofs that have any claim to these dominions. Wherefore, to corroborate this opinion, we need only refer to the ancient language of the Irish, when we shall find it to be a dialect of the Celtic, intermingled with many Gothic words, imported by the Belgic colonies, by the Scandinavians, and by the English.

Without tracing any further the original population of Ireland, as it is a topic, indeed, somewhat obscure and intricate, it may not be improper to observe concerning the present Irish, that there are *three* races of people in the island, which are ; First, The *Spanish* found in Kerry, and a part of Limerick and Cork ; these, according to the Rev. J. Goldsmith, are "tall and thin, but well made, of a long visage, dark eyes and long black lank hair." In the time of Elizabeth, he says, the Spaniards had a settlement on the coast of Kerry, and the island of Valentia derives its name from Spanish origin. Second : The *Scotch* race in the north are distinguished by complexion, accent, and many peculiarities which mark the northern Britons. Third : in a district near Dublin, and in the county of Wexford, the *Saxon* tongue is spoken without receiving much mixture or corruption from

that of the Irish, and the people have a diversity of customs and manners which distinguish them strikingly from natives of the same island. The rest of the kingdom is, according to Mr. Arthur Young, made up of mongrels. The Milesian or Spanish race of Irish, which may be called native, is scattered over the kingdom, but chiefly found in Connaught and Munster."

But notwithstanding the darkness and perplexity in which the general history of this country is involved, I would not say, as some writers pretend, that it is "merely fabulous" until the coming of Henry the second. No doubt, very few literary monuments have been yet discovered in Ireland, earlier than the introduction of Christianity into the country, and that the evidence of any transaction previous to that time, rests entirely on the credit of Christian writers, and their collections from old poets, or their transcripts of records may be deemed to have been made in the abandoned ages of superstition and paganism. But certain it is, that its history may be traced with equal authenticity through the medium, of the very same materials that other nations trace theirs, and that for several centuries preceding the birth of Christ, Ireland had arts and polity when England had neither. For "long before the arrival of *Saint Patrick* in the 5th century, the Christian religion had been received in Ireland;" and at his coming he found there many holy and learned preachers, whose votaries were pious and obedient: and, as the Rev. Clement Cruttwell justly remarks, "that good man but established and confirmed the gospel that had been introduced before."

S. S.

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